

# TERRITORIAL STIGMATIZATION IN THE AGE OF ADVANCED MARGINALITY

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**ABSTRACT** The comparative sociology of the structure, dynamics, and experience of urban relegation in the United States and the European Union during the past three decades reveals the emergence of a new regime of marginality. This regime generates forms of poverty that are neither residual, nor cyclical or transitional, but inscribed in the future of contemporary societies insofar as they are fed by the ongoing fragmentation of the wage labour relationship, the functional disconnection of dispossessed neighbourhoods from the national and global economies, and the reconfiguration of the welfare state in the polarizing city. Based on a methodical comparison between the black American ghetto and the French working-class *banlieue* at century's turn, this article spotlights three distinctive spatial properties of 'advanced marginality' – territorial fixation and stigmatization, spatial alienation and the dissolution of 'place', and the loss of a hinterland – and draws out their implications for the formation of the 'precariat' in postindustrial societies.

**KEYWORDS** advanced society • class formation • poverty • precariousness • space • stigma • subproletariat • urban marginality

The comparative sociology of the structure, dynamics, and experience of urban relegation in the United States and the main countries of the European Union during the past three decades reveals not a *convergence* on the pattern of the US ghetto, as the dominant media and political discourse would have it, but the *emergence* of a new regime of marginality on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>1</sup> This regime generates forms of poverty that are neither residual, nor cyclical or transitional, but indeed inscribed in the future of

contemporary societies insofar as they are fed by the ongoing fragmentation of the wage-labour relationship, the functional disconnection of dispossessed neighbourhoods from the national and global economies, and the reconfiguration of the welfare state into an instrument for enforcing the obligation of paid work in the polarizing city. Based on a methodical comparison of the black American ghetto and the French working-class *banlieue* (outer city) at century's turn (Wacquant, 2007), as well as a selective probing into the changing forms of social relations and everyday experience in neighbourhoods of relegation in other advanced societies, this article spotlights three distinctive spatial properties of 'advanced marginality' and draws out their implications for the formation of the 'precariat' in postindustrial societies at the dawn of the 21st century.

### **TERRITORIAL FIXATION AND STIGMATIZATION**

Rather than being disseminated throughout working-class areas, advanced marginality tends to concentrate in isolated and bounded territories increasingly perceived by both outsiders and insiders as social purgatories, leprous badlands at the heart of the postindustrial metropolis where only the refuse of society would accept to dwell.

When these 'penalized spaces' (Pétronnet, 1982) are, or threaten to become, permanent fixtures of the urban landscape, discourses of vilification proliferate and agglomerate about them, 'from below', in the ordinary interactions of daily life, as well as 'from above', in the journalistic, political and bureaucratic (and even scientific) fields.<sup>2</sup> A *blemish of place* is thus superimposed on the already existing stigmata traditionally associated with poverty and ethnic origin or postcolonial immigrant status, to which it is closely linked but not reducible. It is remarkable that Erving Goffman (1963) does not mention place of residence as one of the 'disabilities' that can 'disqualify the individual' and deprive him or her from 'full acceptance by others'. Yet territorial infamy displays properties analogous to those of bodily, moral, and tribal stigmata, and it poses dilemmas of information management, identity, and social relations quite similar to these, even as it also sports distinctive properties of its own. Of the three main types of stigma catalogued by Goffman (1963: 4–5) – 'abominations of the body', 'blemishes of individual character' and marks of 'race, nation and religion' – it is to the third that territorial stigma is akin, since, like the latter, it 'can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family'. But, unlike these other stamps of dishonour, it can be quite easily dissimulated and attenuated – even annulled – through geographic mobility.

In every metropolis of the First World, one or more towns, districts or concentrations of public housing are publicly known and recognized as those urban hellholes in which violence, vice, and dereliction are the order of things. Some even acquire the status of national eponym for all the evils

and dangers now believed to afflict the dualized city:<sup>3</sup> Les Minguettes and La Courneuve or the Mirail housing complex in Toulouse for France; South Central Los Angeles, the Bronx and the project of Cabrini Green in Chicago for the United States; Duisberg-Marxloh and Berlin-Neukölln for Germany; the districts of Toxteth in Liverpool, Saint Paul in Bristol, or Meadow Well in Newcastle for England; and Bijlmer and Westelijke Tuinsteden in Amsterdam for Holland. Even the societies that have best resisted the rise of advanced marginality, like the Scandinavian countries, are affected by this phenomenon of territorial stigmatization linked to the emergence of zones reserved for the urban outcasts:

It doesn't matter where I travel [through the provinces of Sweden], everywhere I get the same questions when the people I meet hear where I come from: 'Do you live in Tensta? How can you live there? How can you manage to live in a ghetto?' (Pred, 2000: 129)<sup>4</sup>

Whether or not these areas are in fact dilapidated and dangerous, and their population composed essentially of poor people, minorities and foreigners, matters little in the end: the prejudicial belief that they are suffices to set off socially noxious consequences.

This is true at the level of the structure and texture of everyday social relations. Living in a (sub)proletarian housing project on the periphery of Paris, for example, creates a 'muted sentiment of guilt and shame whose unacknowledged weight warps human contact' (Pétonnet, 1982: 148). People there commonly hide their address, avoid having family and friends visit them at home, and feel compelled to make excuses for residing in an infamous locale that stains the image they have of themselves. 'I'm not from the *cité*, me myself', insists a young woman from Vitry-sur-Seine, 'I live here because I have problems right now but I'm not from here, I have nothing to do with all those people over here' (Pétonnet, 1982: 149). One of her neighbours invites the anthropologist to not confuse the *cité* with a neighbourhood, 'because in a neighbourhood you have everybody ... whereas here you have only shit' (Pétonnet, 1982: 14). Similarly, inhabitants of Chicago's ghetto commonly deny belonging to the microsociety of the neighbourhood and strive to distance themselves from a place and population that they know are universally sullied, and of which the media and certain scholarly discourse never stop giving a debased image (Wacquant, 2007).

The acute sense of social indignity that enshrouds neighbourhoods of relegation can be attenuated only by thrusting the stigma onto a faceless, demonized other – the downstairs neighbours, the immigrant family dwelling in an adjacent building, the youths from across the street who 'do drugs' or are engaged in street 'hustling', or the residents over on the next block whom one suspects of illegally drawing unemployment or welfare support. This logic of *lateral denigration and mutual distanciation*, which tends to further unravel the already weakened collectives of deprived urban zones, is difficult to check inasmuch as:

the stigmatized neighbourhood symbolically degrades those who live in it and they degrade it symbolically in return, since, being deprived of all the assets necessary to participate in the various social games, their common lot consists only of their common excommunication. Assembling in one place a population homogeneous in its dispossession also has the effect of accentuating dispossession. (Bourdieu, [1993] 1999: 129, my translation)

The effects of territorial stigmatization are also felt at the level of public policies. Once a place is publicly labelled as a ‘lawless zone’ or ‘outlaw estate’, outside the common norm,<sup>5</sup> it is easy for the authorities to justify special measures, deviating from both law and custom, which can have the effect – if not the intention – of destabilizing and further marginalizing their occupants, subjecting them to the dictates of the deregulated labour market, and rendering them invisible or driving them out of a coveted space.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in the wake of a series of sensationalistic reports on television, the neighbourhood of São João de Deus, a ‘slummified’ sector of northern Porto with a strong and conspicuous presence of Gypsies and Cape Verdean descendants, is nowadays known throughout Portugal as the infernal incarnation of the ‘bairro social degradado’. The municipality of Porto took advantage of its squalid reputation as a ‘hipermercado das drogas’ to launch an ‘urban renewal’ operation which, thanks to a series of muscular police raids, aims essentially at expelling and scattering the local addicts, squatters, unemployed and other human detritus to insert the neighbourhood back into the city’s real estate circuit – without worrying in the slightest way over the fate of the thousands of residents thus displaced.<sup>7</sup>

### **SPATIAL ALIENATION AND THE DISSOLUTION OF ‘PLACE’**

The obverse side of this process of territorial stigmatization is the dissolution of ‘place’, that is, the loss of a humanized, culturally familiar and socially filtered locale with which marginalized urban populations identify and in which they feel ‘at home’ and in relative security. Theories of post-Fordism intimate that the current reconfiguration of capitalism involves not only a vast reshuffling of firms and economic flows, jobs, and people *in space* but also a sea-change in the organization and experience *of space* itself (see especially Harvey, 1989; Soja, 1989; Shields, 1991). These theories are consistent with the radical makeover of both the black American ghetto and the French working-class *banlieues* after the close of the 1970s, as these have been reduced from communal ‘places’ bathed in shared emotions and joint meanings, supported by practices and institutions of mutuality, to indifferent ‘spaces’ of mere survival and relentless contest.

The distinction between these two conceptions or modes of appropriation of the extant environment may be formulated thus: “Places” are “full” and “fixed,” stable arenas’ whereas “spaces” are “potential voids,” “possible threats,” areas that have to be feared, secured or fled’ (Smith, 1987: 297). The shift from a politics of place to a politics of space, adds sociologist

Dennis Smith, is encouraged by the weakening of bonds founded upon a territorial community inside the city. It is also fostered by the tendency of individuals to retreat into the privatized sphere of the household and by the strengthening of feelings of vulnerability arising in the course of the pursuit of security and by the generalized weakening of social collectives.<sup>8</sup> One must be careful here not to romanticize conditions in the proletarian neighbourhoods and segregated enclaves of yesteryear: there never was a 'golden age' when life in the American ghetto and the French popular *banlieue* was sweet and social relations therein harmonious and fulfilling. Yet it remains that the experience of urban relegation has, at this level, changed in ways that make it distinctively more burdensome and alienating today.

To illustrate briefly: until the 1960s, the black American ghetto was still a 'place', a collective *oekoumène*, a humanized urban landscape with which blacks felt a strong positive identification – even as it was the product of brutal and inflexive racial oppression – as expressed in the rhetoric of 'soul' (Hannerz, 1968), and over which they desired to establish collective control – such was the priority goal of the Black Power movement (Van Deburg, 1992). Today's hyperghetto is a 'space', and this denuded space is no longer a shared resource that African Americans can mobilize and deploy to shelter themselves from white domination and find collective support for their strategies of mobility. On the contrary: it has become a vector of intra-communal division and an instrument for the virtual imprisonment of the black urban subproletariat, a dreaded and detested territory from which, as one informant from Chicago's South Side abruptly put it, 'everybody's tryin' to get out'.<sup>9</sup>

Far from providing a protective shield from the insecurities and pressures of the outside world, the space of the hyperghetto is akin to an entropic and perilous battlefield upon which a four-cornered contest is waged between (i) independent and organized street predators (hustlers and gangs) who seek to plunder what meager riches still circulate in it; (ii) local residents and their grass-roots organizations (such as MAD, 'Mothers Against Drugs', on the West Side of Chicago, or block clubs and merchants' associations where they have survived) who strive to preserve the use- and exchange-value of their neighbourhood; (iii) state agencies of surveillance and social control entrusted with containing violence and disorder within the perimeter of the racialized metropolitan core, including social workers, the police, courts, probation and parole agents, etc.; and (iv) outside institutional predators (realtors in particular) for whom converting fringe sections of the Black Belt for the uses of the middle and upper classes coming back into the city can yield phenomenal profits.<sup>10</sup>

### **LOSS OF A HINTERLAND**

Adding to the erosion of place is the disappearance of a viable hinterland. In previous phases of modern capitalist crisis and restructuring, workers temporarily rejected from the labour market could fall back upon the social economy of their community of provenance, be it a functioning working-class

borough, the communal ghetto, or a rural village in the backcountry or in the country of emigration (Young and Willmott, 1986 [1957]; Kornblum, 1974; Piore, 1979; Sayad, 1991).<sup>11</sup>

When they were dismissed from the factories and foundries, mills and car shops of Chicago where they toiled on account of a cyclical downturn in the industrial economy, the residents of the mid-20th-century Bronzeville could rely on the support of kin, clique, and church. Most inhabitants in their district remained wage-earners and a densely knit web of neighbourhood-based organizations helped cushion the blow of economic hardship. Moreover, the 'shady enterprises' of the criminal and street economies, which ramified across the entire black class structure, supplied precious stopgap employment (Drake and Cayton, 1993 [1945]: 524–5). By contrast, a majority of the residents of the South Side in 1990 were jobless; the heart of the Black Belt has been virtually emptied of its means of collective sustenance; and bridges to wage work outside have been drastically narrowed if not cut by the outright deproletarianization of large segments of the local population: brothers and sisters, uncles and friends are hard pressed to help one find employment when they have themselves long been jobless (Sullivan, 1989; Wilson, 1996).

Nowadays, individuals durably excluded from paid employment in neighbourhoods of relegation cannot readily rely on collective informal support while they wait for new work which, moreover, may well never come or come only in the guise of insecure and intermittent subemployment. To survive, they must resort to individual strategies of 'self-provisioning', 'shadow work' and unreported employment, underground commerce, criminal activities and quasi-institutionalized 'hustling' (Gershuny, 1983; Wacquant, [1992] 1998; Engbersen, 1996), which do little to alleviate precariousness since 'the distributional consequences of the pattern of informal work in industrial societies is to reinforce, rather than to reduce or to reflect, contemporary patterns of inequality' (Pahl, 1989: 249). The character of the informal economy has also changed in many cities. It is more and more disjoined from the regular wage-labour sector, when it is not dominated by criminal trades (Barthélémy et al., 1990; Leonard, 1998). It follows that its parallel circuits offer fewer and fewer entry points into the 'legit' occupational world so that youths who engage in underground work often have every chance of being durably marginalized (Bourgois, 1995). If the poor neighbourhoods of the Fordist era were 'inner-city slums of hope', their descendants in the age of deregulated capitalism are more akin to the 'squatter settlements of despair' of the South American urban periphery – to borrow an expression from Susan Eckstein (1990).

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNFINISHED GENESIS OF THE 'PRECARIAT'**

Advanced marginality also differs from previous forms of urban poverty in that it develops in the context of class decomposition (Azémard, 1992;

Dudley, 1994) rather than class consolidation, under the press of a double tendency toward precarization and *deproletarianization* rather than toward proletarian unification and homogenization (Kronauer et al., 1993; Wilson, 1996). Those who are subjected to its tropism and caught in its swirl therefore find themselves disconnected from the traditional instruments of mobilization and representation of constituted groups and, as a consequence, deprived of a *language*, a repertoire of shared images and signs through which to conceive a collective destiny and to project possible alternative futures (Stedman Jones, 1984).

Aging industrial labourers and lower-level clerks reduced to workers on a white-collar assembly line or made expendable by technological innovations and the spatial redistribution of productive activities; precarious and temporary workers in the deregulated service sectors; apprentices, trainees, and holders of fixed-time job contracts; the unemployed running out of rights and participants to 'social minima' programmes; long-term recipients of public aid and the chronically 'homeless'; beggars, delinquents and hustlers living off the booty economy of the street; human rejects of the social and medical services and regular customers of the criminal justice system; the disenchanted offspring of the declining fractions of the autochthonous working class facing the unexpected competition of youths from ethnically stigmatized communities and of new immigrant inflows on the markets for jobs and credentials: how to forge the sense of a common condition and purpose when economic emergency and social necessity are so diversely configured? How to unify categories that, while they may occupy, briefly or durably, close positions in the structure of social and urban space in synchronic cross-section, follow divergent trajectories or embody dissimilar dispositions and orientations towards the future? And how, beyond these neighbouring solidarities, to establish tangible and efficient links with the range of employees destabilized by the desocialization of labour at all levels of the socio-occupational hierarchy (Perrin, 2004)?

The very proliferation of labels supposed to designate the dispersed and disparate populations caught in the pincer of social and spatial marginalization – 'new poor', 'zonards', 'the excluded', 'underclass', 'banlieues youth', 'racailles' or 'yobs', and the trinity of '*sans*' recently canonized in the French political debate (the job-less, home-less, and paper-less migrants) – speaks volumes on the state of *symbolic derangement* afflicting the fringes and fissures of the recomposed social and urban structure. The absence of a common idiom around and by which to unify themselves accentuates the objective fragmentation of today's urban poor. The perennial organizational instrument of collective voice and claims-making of the urban proletariat, namely, manual trade unions and their public-sector offshoots, is turning out to be strikingly ill-suited to tackle issues that arise and spill beyond the conventional sphere of regulated wage work, and their defensive tactics often only aggravate the dilemmas they face and the multiple cleavages that separate

them from the new (sub)proletarians of the margins.<sup>12</sup> The nascent organizations of the dispossessed of all stripes, such as unions of the jobless, homeless and paperless immigrant defense groups, and grass-roots associations battling on the multiple fronts of ‘exclusion’, where they have emerged, are too fragile and have yet to earn official recognition on the political stage to hope to exert more than sporadic and punctual pressure (Siméant, 1998; Demazière and Pignoni, 1999).

As for the parties of the Left, to whom the task of representing the categories deprived of economic or cultural capital on the political stage traditionally befalls, they are much too preoccupied with their internecine struggles and entrapped in party-machine logics and media coups – when they have not openly reoriented themselves towards the educated middle classes like the Socialist Party in France – to understand the nature and scale of the upheavals refashioning neighbourhoods of relegation, on the one hand, and to envisage and engage the public policies necessary to stem the spiral of advanced marginalization, on the other.<sup>13</sup>

The very difficulty of naming the fragments, scoria, and splinters of the dualized market society that collect in the dispossessed zones of the metropolis attests to the fact that the *precariat* – if one may name thus the insecure fringes of the new proletariat – has not yet even acceded to the status of ‘object class’ (Bourdieu, 1977), ‘compelled to form its subjectivity out of its objectification’ by others. It remains in the state of a simple composite conglomerate, *collectio personarium plurium*, made up of heterogeneous individuals and categories and *negatively defined* by social privation, material need, and symbolic deficit. Only an immense, specifically political work of aggregation and re-presentation (in a triple cognitive, iconographic, and dramaturgical sense) can hope to enable this conglomerate to accede to collective existence and thus to collective action. But this work stumbles over an unavoidable and insuperable contradiction, springing as it does from the fissiparous tendencies that are constitutive of it: the precariat is a sort of *still-born group*, whose gestation is necessarily unfinished since one can work to consolidate it only to help its members flee from it, either by finding a haven in stable wage labour or by escaping from the world of work altogether (through social redistribution and state protection). Contrary to the proletariat in the Marxist vision of history, which is called upon to abolish itself in the long term by uniting and universalizing itself, the precariat can only make itself to immediately unmake itself.<sup>14</sup>

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*Politics* (2005), and *Das Janusgesicht des Ghettos und andere Essays* (2006). For more information, see: <http://sociology.berkeley.edu/faculty/wacquant/> [email: loic@berkeley.edu]

### Notes

1. This article is adapted from Chapter 8 of Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007), to which the reader is referred for an in-depth analysis of the structure and transformation of neighbourhoods of relegation in the United States and France at the close of the 20th century and a fuller ideal-typical characterization of the new regime of urban marginality.
2. Social scientists have added significantly to the burden of urban infamy by concocting pseudo-scholarly notions that dress up ordinary class and racial prejudices in an analytic-sounding language. Such is the case, for example, with the asinine category of 'underclass area' put forth by Erol Ricketts and Isabel Sawhill (1988) to characterize (in perfectly circular fashion) neighbourhoods inhabited by the 'underclass', defined by a quantified battery of spatially measured 'social pathologies'.
3. Some 'hotbeds' of urban perdition, such as the Bronx for example, achieve a similar status on the international level, as Auyero (1999) points out in his study of a shanty-town in Greater Buenos Aires.
4. Tensta is a neighbourhood in the northern suburbs of Stockholm which houses high concentrations of unemployed and immigrants. In turn-of-the-century Sweden, 'problem neighbourhoods' (*problemområde*) like Rinkeby in Stockholm and Rosengård at Malmö, are commonly and openly designated by the quasi-synonym of 'neighbourhoods of high immigrant density' (*invandrartätområde*). A fairly similar doublet is used to designate zones of urban relegation in Holland: '*achterstandswijken*' and '*concentratiebuurten*' (Uitermark, 2003).
5. One could cite here countless books on the *banlieues* that have flooded French bookstores over the past several years, in which class racism rivals with fantasies about foreign peril. We shall mention just one, whose title aptly sums up its outlook: *Outlaw Estates. Another World, A Youth Who Impose their own Laws* [*Cités hors-la-loi. Un autre monde, une jeunesse qui impose ses lois*] (Henni and Marinet, 2002). Marinet is one of the journalists from the national television channel France 2 who originated the media myth of the explosion of '*tournantes*' ('gang rapes') in the dispossessed *banlieues*). Under cover of analysis and sounding a civic alarm, these books partake of the discourse of vilification of neighbourhoods of exile and of symbolic deportation of their residents.
6. One would need, in this perspective, to examine how the demonic legend of the 'underclass' (paradoxically promoted also by progressive academics) in the United States helped to legitimize, on the one hand, the 'reform' of welfare leading to the establishment of 'welfare' with the Work and Personal Responsibility Act of 1996 and, on the other, the policy of massive destruction of large housing projects in the ghetto under the pretext of the alleged benefits of spatial dispersion for the poor, officialized by the 1998 Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act (Crump, 2003).
7. I am indebted to Luis Fernandes (of the University of Porto) for this information, and I refer the reader to his analysis of the spatial stigmatization attached to

- the ‘psychotropic territories’ of the Portuguese city (Fernandes, 1998: 68–79, 151–4; 169–74).
8. For a painstaking analysis of the ‘defensive and withdrawn privatism’ of the traditional working-class and its accentuation against the backdrop of group decomposition in a northern mining town of France, see Schwartz (1990). For a description of the unraveling of forms of neighbourhood sociability and solidarity inside the West Side and South Side ghettos of Chicago under the press of extreme deprivation and violence, read the narrative accounts of Kotlowitz (1991) and Jones and Newman (1997).
  9. The (partially unsuccessful) efforts of the black middle class of the South Side of Chicago to distance itself spatially and socially from the crumbling core of the ghetto and the threats it contains are skillfully studied by Pattillo-McCoy (1999).
  10. See Venkatesh (2000) for a contextualized account of the struggles of the 1990s between the tenants of the Robert Taylor Homes, the local gangs, the Chicago Housing Administration, and various other city agencies; and see Abu-Lughod (1994) and Mele (1999) on the battles over the ‘gentrification’ of working-class districts reinvested by the (petty) bourgeoisie in New York City.
  11. On this topic, one would benefit from a rereading of the classic analysis of Larissa Lomnitz (1977) on the ‘substitute social security system’ composed of friends and neighbours in the shanty-towns of Mexico and the monograph by Carol Stack (1974) on women’s networks of mutual help in a black ghetto of the Midwest.
  12. This is the case when unions relinquish hard-won collective rights to ward off mass layoffs or plant relocations, or when they accept the institution of two-tier pay and benefit systems as a means of curtailing the erosion of their membership (as is the case in a number of key sectors in the United States, such as the automobile industry, telephone services, and air transport).
  13. Olivier Masclet (2003) shows, based on an in-depth study of a communist municipality in the close suburban ring of Paris, how social and spatial marginalization was accompanied by the marginalization of ‘cité activists’ in the local political field.
  14. For a collection of texts, documents, and calls for the European mobilization of the ‘precariat’ (a term launched by Droits Devants, see ‘Globalisation du précaire, mondialisation des résistances’, *EcoRev*, May 2005), consult the multilingual site: <http://republicart.net/disc/precariat/index.htm>. For an analysis of the rise of instability in the labour market and the new forms of mobilization it has generated on the margins of regular wage-labour, see Perrin (2004).

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